

Jindal aides weigh in on remap, raise ire

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Little more than a week after opening a redistricting session with a call for bipartisanship, Gov. Bobby Jindal angered Democrats on Monday when two top aides met with House Republicans.

Democratic leaders complained that Jindal's aides did not cross the hall to drop in on their meeting despite the governor publicly urging lawmakers to blur party lines while shaping the state's political districts.

"He said we need to be non-

partisan and here he sent two staffers to the Republican delegation meeting this morning," said House Democratic Caucus Chairman John Bel Edwards, of Amite.

At least one GOP lawmaker said the Jindal administration's message was to emphasize the importance of maintaining Republican districts in the House. The governor's chief of staff, Timmy Teepell, said hours later that he did not recall broaching that topic.

"They just came. We try to work where we can to make

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Advocate staff photo by BILL FEIG

State Rep. John Bel Edwards, D-Amite, claimed Monday that Gov. Bobby Jindal went back on his word to keep the redistricting session a bipartisan process. Two top Jindal aides met with Republican House members shortly before debate began on a redistricting bill. Edwards leads the House Democratic Caucus. At right is state Rep. Alan Seabaugh, R-Shreveport. He sponsored an amendment to strip the redistricting bill of a new black majority district whose configuration would have forced him to run against another GOP incumbent. The House approved Seabaugh's amendment on a near party-line vote.

REMAP

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sure that Republicans work together in this process," said House Speaker Jim Tucker, R-Terrytown. Tucker sponsored House Bill 1, which redraws the election districts for all 105 state representatives.

Teepell said he met with Republicans at their invitation to address concerns that a new minority House district in Shreveport would be created at the detriment of an existing minority House district.

Creation of the new black majority seat would have resulted in two incumbent Republicans running against each other.

On a near-party line 57-46 vote, the House later Monday eliminated the new black majority district. Only one Republican and two representatives without party affiliation joined the Democrats in trying to block the amendment that removed the district from HB1.

The House has 46 Democrats, 53 Republicans and four members without party affiliation. Two House seats currently are unfilled.

Teepell said that he also supports amendments that would preserve two Republican legislative districts.

"I was asked to speak to the Republican caucus and express our opinions," Teepell said.

The meeting occurred shortly before the House convened to start deciding how legislative districts should be drawn because of population shifts since the 2000 U.S. census. Members need to determine how many minority districts should be added.

The HB1 proposal that would have created a 30th minority district in Shreveport would have included part of the district includes black population in Democratic state Rep. Barbara Norton's Shreveport-based district.

Teepell said Norton would not be able to win re-election under the proposal set forth

by state Rep. Rick Gallot, D-Ruston. He said he didn't know what Gallot had against Norton.

Norton said later in the day that she does not know who Teepell is. She said she might have mentioned in passing her concerns about her district to another Jindal administration aide.

Gallot dismissed as "ridiculous" Teepell's suggestion that he targeted Norton.

Legislative Black Caucus Chairman state Rep. Pat Smith, D-Baton Rouge, said there was consensus among black legislators on creating as many minority districts as possible.

She said the Jindal administration should have approached black and Democratic legislators if there was concern about the minority district proposal.

"That's an unbelievable statement for them to make as to why they were even there," Smith said.

Republican delegation chairman state Rep. Jane Smith, of Bossier City, said Teepell and the governor's executive counsel, Stephen Waguespack, were invited to attend.

"We wanted to get their feelings, opinion about it," said Jane Smith, referring to the remap plan debated on the House floor Monday.

HB1, by Tucker, would redraw the election districts for the 105 state representatives.

"They came down and talked about the fact that Republicans need to make sure we don't dilute our vote either," said Jane Smith.

The administration opposes creation of a 30th minority district in Shreveport because it puts Republican state Reps. Richie Burford, of Stonewall, and Alan Seabaugh, of Shreveport, in the same district, she

said.

Jindal said at the beginning of the year that he would limit his involvement in the redrawing of political lines. He also called for bipartisanship.

The special session was called by legislative leaders rather than by the governor.

The governor addressed the Legislature on the session's opening day by invitation. He emphasized the importance of maintaining what he characterized as a bipartisan tradition in Louisiana. "We will come together as one group to do what is best for our state," Jindal said at the time.

Jindal also joked about the minimal impact the session will have on his office. Since he is elected by voters across the state, he said he only will be affected if Louisiana annexes Texas or Arkansas.

House redistricting leader Gallot said the Jindal aides' meeting with the Republican delegation "certainly gives the appearance there's some involvement." He suggested the Jindal administration review the archives of public hearings that were held leading up to the session.

"As chairman, I've tried to set a tone of transparency and openness, and I feel like from a legislative standpoint, we've done a pretty good job of that," Gallot said.

Two Republicans and one no party representative voted for the minority district when it was added to the House remap plan in the House and Governmental Affairs Committee. The 30th minority district passed on a 10-9 committee vote.

Edwards said Jindal's involvement flies in the face of what the governor promised in

a speech that opened the redistricting session.

"That's par for the course though with this governor. His public and private statements are rarely in harmony," said Edwards.

Rep. Pat Smith said she was appalled by the governor getting into what is purely a legislative arena.

"This is a House situation and a Senate situation. There should not be that involvement in it," Smith said.

A few days into the special session, Jindal made it clear that he favors two north Louisiana-based districts for the state's congressional dele-

gation. The idea would preserve much of the Monroe-based district of U.S. Rep. Rodney Alexander, R-Quitman.

"The governor clearly has the ability to influence the process and he has chosen to back vertical districts. That has to have an impact," said U.S. Rep. Bill Cassidy, R-Baton Rouge.

Mark Ballard of the Capitol news bureau contributed to this report.